

Extended Essay

English B

Comical Characters: Mrs Slipslop and Parson Adams

Research Question: What does Fielding intend to convey with the comic elements and extraordinary characters in the novel *Joseph Andrews*?

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Introduction

Henry Fielding was an English author from the 18th century who identified the structure of the modern novel through his works such as 'Amelia' and 'Tom Jones'. Fielding was also a magistrate, which allowed his novels to show that he was a man with a passion for justice and reform. He was born in Somerset, England on April 22, 1707. Fielding received his education in Eton College, where his love of literature, his knowledge of the classics and studies of classical authors began. His goal was to become a playwright. He later completed this goal and finished his first play in 1728. As previously mentioned, Fielding was a man with an independent mind and was not afraid of delivering what he thought to others. This allowed him to write plays that were openly criticizing the government.¹

Fielding is known as a neoclassical writer. Neoclassicism can be described as a revival of classical taste and sensibility that was characterized by order, accuracy, and structure. However, unlike the Renaissance attitude, which saw humans as creatures with infinite potential, the neoclassicists perceived the human nature as something dualistic and inherently flawed².

The Neoclassical age was when verbal skill carried great value. Instead of using shouting to convey their thoughts and feelings, the authors used clever talking and debates. Looking and acting properly, manners and virtues such as self-control and balance carried great importance in the Neoclassical age, therefore outrages and rebellions were not supposed to happen. Fielding puts the theological and ethical concerns of this period forward in his novels.³

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Fielding>

² <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/neoclassicism>

³ <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/engl201/neoclassical.htm>

Joseph Andrews is intended as a comic romance along the lines of Don Quixote. The novel can be referred as a comic epic poem in prose, as it contains aspects such as adventures, love, lust and conflict. The comical characters in the novel are reflections of people that we can easily encounter in our daily lives and throughout the novel, these characters are perceived in a humorous light.

The novel's main characters are a footman named Joseph Andrews, and his friend Abraham Adams. Joseph himself is described in the novel as a seventeen-year-old handsome man who is virtuous, hardworking and innocent. He works as a footman for Sir Thomas Booby. Following the death of Sir Thomas Booby, his wife Lady Booby makes advances to Joseph who does not respond to Lady Booby's interests since he wishes to follow Pamela's chaste example and the teachings of Parson Adams, who acts as Joseph's moral guide. Adams is not only Joseph's mentor but also a parson. Joseph and Abraham Adams have a bunch of adventures, in all of which they manage to expose the hypocrisy and phoniness of others through their own actions.

Humour can be defined as the quality of action, speech or writing which provides entertainment and amusement to the reader. Its source is usually the perception of the inconsistencies of life from the writer's perspective.⁴ The author of the novel, Henry Fielding, is amongst the best humorists in English Literature. Fielding's main goal in writing Joseph Andrews was to criticise the society's hypocrisy. But contrary to the other writers in his time, Fielding wanted to achieve his goal by making his readers laugh out of their misery. Thus, he employed sarcasm on many

⁴ <http://maenglishnotespk.blogspot.com/2014/05/humour-in-joseph-andrews.html>

occasions in the novel. Farce, which can be defined as the humour arising from exaggerated situations and improbable events is also included frequently. Slapstick humor and physical comedy are also commonly featured in a farce. *Joseph Andrews* is a novel that includes a satisfying amount of farcical situations to make his readers laugh. Some examples to these situations include the fight scene at the inn and Parson Adams getting covered with hog blood.

Joseph Andrews, was published in the year 1742 by author Henry Fielding. The novel was not only his first full-length novel, but also it was one of the earliest written English novels which allowed the author to gain the title “the father of English novel”.

For the novel *Joseph Andrews* by Henry Fielding, the characters that are created for the purpose of making the audience laugh while representing different aspects carry great importance. This made for a thought-provoking analysis and led to an exploration of the question: **What are the comic elements and characters in *Joseph Andrews* as a novel and what does Fielding intend to say with these characters?**

For the purpose of giving an answer to my research question, I have concentrated on a few sub-topics. Initially, I examined the writer’s life and experience. Secondly, I did some research on the 18th century, the period where the author of the book, Henry Fielding wrote this novel to have a better understanding of the sense of humour in that period of time. Finally, I analysed the characters that were featured in this novel and looked into the messages that Fielding was trying to convey by using them. I dug deeper into these topics to find out what Henry Fielding intends to say with his comic elements and characters in *Joseph Andrews* as a novel. It is necessary to explain the period Fielding lived to acquire knowledge about the social life and

literature in it, Fielding's life, philosophy, ideologies and experiences are also important in this matter, as learning about them makes the audience have a better understanding of what made the author write this book and created the characters the way he did.

Development

A) Parson Adams

One of the main characters in the novel that represents the aspects of pure humour is Parson Adams. He is described as a naive, virtuous and friendly man but at the same time, Fielding has made him absent-minded and given him amusing behaviour. In the novel, these character traits are depicted in the quote:

“He was besides a Man of good Sense, good Parts and good Nature; but was at the same time as entirely ignorant of the Ways of this World, as an Infant just entered to it possibly be. As he never had any intention to deceive, so he never suspected of such a Design in others. He was generous, friendly and brave to an Excess; But Simplicity was his characteristic...(Fielding,65)

By giving him such a personality, Fielding allows this character to establish a simpler view for vanity and hypocrisy.

Adams' Forgetfulness:

Henry Fielding has made Adams an eccentric man who is a bundle of contradictions, one who often leaves his hat and other belongings behind, and is later obliged to return for them. In the novel, it is mentioned that Mr. Adams is preoccupied and careless about his belongings, despite their value to him. An example to this statement can be seen in Book 2, Chapter 5 where he mistakes his sermons for clothes such as t-shirts and has to go back to get them :

“The Accident was that those Sermons which the Parson was travelling to London to publish were, O my good Reader, left behind what he had mistaken for them in the Saddle-Bags being no other than three shirts, a pair of Shoes and some other Necessaries which Mrs. Adams thought her Husband would want Shirts more than Sermons on his Journey, had carefully provided him.” ... “ ‘Bless me Sir where are your Sermons?’ The Parson answered ‘There, there Child, there they are under my shirts.’ Now it happened that he had taken forth his last shirt and the Vehicle remained visibly empty.” (Fielding, 121)

Parson Adams and Vanity:

Parson Adams usually exhibits vanity through his beliefs or the amount of knowledge he has. He constantly tries to defend that his sermons are always correct and gets into arguments with other characters in hopes of surpassing them. A direct example to this statement can be found in Book 1, Chapter 16, in which Joseph Andrews gets injured and his doctor and Adams argue about what they think is best for him. The argument can also be seen as an example of vanity because both of these characters see themselves as knowing what is best for Andrews and cannot see past their own reflection. The same argument ends with the doctor being right, and Parson Adams' feelings were expressed through the sentence *"very contently suffering the Doctor to enjoy his Victory,"* which shows that he cannot handle being wrong in a good manner. Another example that can be shown for Adam's vanity is in the Book 3, Chapter 2 where Mr. Wilson tests Adams on his knowledge of the classics. Similar to the outcomes of the previous instance, this only adds to Adams' inflated ego when he passes Mr. Wilson's test and but impresses him at the same time. Despite his behaviour, Adams criticizes vanity throughout the novel. He mentions writing a sermon related to the subject of vanity and refers to himself as a

great enemy of it. This is ironic, as throughout the novel, there are various examples that support Adams showing vanity.

How does Adams get into such absurd situations?:

Throughout the novel, despite this ego, he remains a kind-hearted man with good intentions whose forgetfulness puts him into absurd situations. For example, in Book 2, Chapter 2 he forgets to pay the bill for the horse's board and feed. It takes some time for him to realize that Joseph has not yet caught up to him and gone back to the inn to pay for what Adams did not; leading him to get worried and wet, because of wading through a puddle. Another one of the absurd situations that he ends up taking place in Book 4, Chapter 14, where he enters Fanny's (Joseph's love interest) room thinking that it is his room, climbs into the bed and drifts off, not knowing that he is lying next to the sleeping Fanny. At dawn, Joseph finds them in the same bed and gets confused. Adams himself is also confused and believes that he is bewitched. When all is understood, however, they laugh at the mistake. Adams also sometimes is not even recognized or treated as a parson should be and often gets into physical fights, but despite these kinds of treatments he never loses his innocent humour and goodness.

Parson Adams' Physical Appearance:

Parson Adams also has an extremely burlesque physical appearance. He is described in the novel as a character "*with a comical face, bearded chin and deeply wrinkled cheeks*", "*a fist rather less than the knuckle of an ox*" and "*with a wrist which Hercules would not have been ashamed of*". It is also mentioned that "*his legs are so long that they almost touch the ground when he drives on his horse's back.*" He usually wears a "*tattered old cassock*" and a "*periwig*" on his head. In addition, he often snaps his fingers. It is apparent that the author gave

Adams such a funny physical appearance because he wanted Adams's appearance to act as a reflection of his hilarious behaviour and comical personality.

What message did the author intend to convey with Parson Adams?:

Abraham Adams is a major character in the novel and he was created to represent many aspects such as vanity and hypocrisy with his good nature, funny behaviour and forgetful mind. Despite this, he is not intended as a role model. The readers of the novel should admire his good character, but should not be inspired by his behaviour in any means because that will result in them constantly being deceived and tricked by other people with worse thoughts in mind. By putting him into absurd situations throughout the novel, Fielding demonstrates Adams as a perfect example of injured innocence. One must not forget however, that Adams being an innocent and good man does not cover up the fact that he is vain. After analysing Adams' characteristic traits and actions in the novel and what the writer said in the preface, it can be said that Fielding created the character of Parson Adams for the purpose of reminding his readers that even the best of us humans are subject to vanity and we should put all our guard against it.

B) Mrs Slipslop

Another significant comic character is Mrs. Slipslop, the 45-year-old maiden "gentlewoman" of Lady Booby who, like her mistress is also sexually interested in Joseph. She is described in the novel as a woman with an egoistical attitude and a hypocritical nature. Throughout the novel, instead of expressing what she really thinks, she keeps changing her statements according to who she is talking to at that particular moment. Her relationship with her mistress, Lady Booby, can be given as an example to better express her hypocritical nature, as while she

is doing service to her, she acts like she has tremendous respect for her and always refers to her as “Madam” but when she is not around, she starts calling her names such as “mad woman.” In addition, Slipslop does not hesitate to threaten Lady Booby with telling her secrets to the people around them when she needs to. At the beginning of the novel, for example, she eavesdrops on a conversation between her mistress and Joseph Andrews and listens to their conversation through a keyhole. Later, when she argues with her master she tells her: “*Servants have tongues as well as their mistresses.*” (Fielding,81) In this quote, she implies that she can tell the others what she has learned about Lady Booby’s feelings towards Joseph, much to the dismay of her mistress.

Mrs Slipslop’s Usage of Big, Made Up Words:

Like Parson Adams, Mrs Slipslop was ridiculed by the author to represent hypocrisy and vanity whilst making his readers laugh when they are reading this novel. The difference between the two characters, however, is that Slipslop represents these traits in a negative way. She usually uses big, made up words in hopes of convincing people that she is smart and aims to confuse them. However, she rarely uses any of these words in their right places and sometimes even misspells them. Three examples of the mentioned situation can be seen in Book 1, Chapter 3 in which she is having a conversation with Parson Adams that goes as follows:

“And why is Latin more necessitious for a Footman than a Gentleman? It is very proper that you Clergyman must learn it, because you can’t preach without it: but I have heard Gentlemen say in London, that is fit for nobody else. I am confidous my Lady would be angry with me for mentioning it, and I shall draw myself into no such Delemy.”
(Fielding,67)

In this line of dialogue, Mrs Slipslop uses the words “necessitous”, “confiduous” and “delemy” instead of “necessary”, “confident” and “dilemma” respectively, further justifying her usage of big words is wrong and her not being aware of this situation can be regarded as funny. The same quote also highlights her vanity by demonstrating that she thinks of herself as too high of a person and patronizes over Parson Adams because of him not being to London as much as she has.

Mrs Slipslop’s Physical Appearance:

In the novel, Fielding also gives quite caricaturesque descriptions for Mrs. Slipslop. In Book 1, Chapter 6, he describes her as:

“She was not at this time remarkably handsome; being very short, and rather too corpulent in body, and somewhat red, with the addition of pimples in the face. Her nose was likewise rather too large, and her eyes too little; nor did she resemble a cow so much in her breath as in two brown globes which she carried before her; one of her little legs was also a little shorter than the other, which occasioned her to limp as she walked.” (Fielding, 72)

It can clearly be understood from this quote that the author deliberately gave Mrs. Slipslop such an unlikeable physical appearance that is most likely a representation of her horrifying personality.

Mrs Slipslop’s Relationship with Joseph:

Through burlesque, to create a sense of funny ridiculousness the author makes his audience laugh by portraying such an old, ugly woman with a terrifying personality who is hungry for

sexuality and attracted to Joseph. This desire is further ridiculed in the quote: *“As when a hungry Tigress, who long had traversed the Woods in fruitless search, sees within the Reach of her Claws a Lamb, she prepared to leap on her Prey; or as a voracious Pike, of immense Size, surveys through the liquid Element a Roach or Gudgeon which cannot escape her Jaws, opens them wide to swallow the little Fish: so did Mrs. Slipslop prepare to lay her violent amorous Hands on the poor Joseph.”*(Fielding,74) In this quotation, Fielding uses simile not only to establish the resemblances between Mrs Slipslop’s prolonging hunger for sex and the predators’ hunger for food and compare Slipslop and Joseph’s relationship to a predator-prey one, but also to imply that Mrs Slipslop is lusting after Joseph just because of his good looks and not for his personality. In other words, her love for him has no spirituality and is completely physical in nature even though she depicts otherwise. Joseph then rejects Slipslop and that leads to a very ironic situation which is born because Slipslop learns that Joseph has always seen her as a mother figure. He tells her: *“I have always loved you as well as if you had been my own mother.”* (Fielding,27)

After Joseph rejects Mrs Slipslop’s attempts to seduce him, we get a glimpse of her hypocritical personality once again when she blames Joseph for having an affair with another housemaid named Betty and calling the women that he attracted stupid, ironically pretending like she did never lust after him by saying: *“O madam! He is so lewd a rascal, that if your ladyship keeps him much longer you will not have one virgin in your house except myself. And yet I can’t conceive what the wenches see in him, to be as foolishly fond as they are; in my eyes he is as ugly a scarecrow as I ever upheld.”* (Fielding,75) In this quote not only she acts like she was not after Joseph all this time by calling him ugly and comparing him to a scarecrow but also like she is innocent and pure by referring herself as the only virgin in the house, further displaying her horrible personality.

Why Fielding created Mrs Slipslop:

Even though Mrs Slipslop did not have as much of a prominent role as Parson Adams in the novel, it will not take much time for one reading the novel carefully to understand what the author intended to say with this particular character. Fielding wanted to have a character in Joseph Andrews with a hideous appearance that is a reflection of her personality, one who can symbolize all people who pretend like something or someone they are not and never reveal their true personalities because of them being so horrible. Throughout the novel a sharp contrast exists between Mrs. Slipslop's statements and actions. There is rarely any conformity found in her actions and her words, which implies that the conclusion in the previous sentences have validity.

Conclusion

Fielding's Joseph Andrews has a significant part in the history of the novel because with this novel, not only did he introduce middle class realism but also mixed theology and comedy. Both of these changes drastically affected the development of novel, and thus, allowed the novel Joseph Andrews to be regarded as a landmark.

Fielding accepts to have used immoralities and evil in many of the occasions and struggles of the main characters. At the same time he highlights that immorality is not a human characteristic, but he sees it as a result of weakness of a human being. In the novel he set forth

different kinds of vices in various scenes to arise Hatred for those Vices and to show that intended Evil cannot succeed.

According to what the writer wrote in the Preface: *“The only source of Ridiculous is Affectation. But though it arises from one Spring only when we consider the infinite Streams into which this one branches, we shall presently cease to admire at the copious Field it affords to an Observer. Now Affectation proceeds from one of these Causes; Vanity and Hypocrisy: for as Vanity puts us on affecting false Characters in order to purchase Applause; So Hypocrisy sets us an Endeavour to avoid Censure by concealing our Vices under an Appearance of their opposite Virtues.”* (Preface 52) the negative traits that we unfortunately cannot control, such as ugliness and poverty cannot be regarded as ridiculous. However, if they arise from sources of affectations such as vanity and hypocrisy they can lead the reader to read and think more and be more entertained. In addition, the writer tries to make his audience aware of the fact that people become vain to draw the attention of others and in hopes of getting their approval. He also highlights that hypocrisy.

As a result of analysing the author’s life, experiences, characters and style in the novel, it can be said that the main purpose of Fielding writing this novel is to be educative about how if expressed with help from absurdity and phoniness, negative traits might seem more sympathetic and hilarious. Creating amusing hypocritical characters rather than simply vain characters is a more effective and entertaining way to instruct readers in morality. Fielding is indicating that he will use satire to expose hypocrisy and teach valuable lessons in his novel. The comical characters (Parson Adams and Mrs Slipslop) that he uses in the novel assist him while he tries

to establish the flaws of humankind and the messages that he wants to convey to his audience in a way that entertains his readers.

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